

compensations. Many Rangers put in entire careers with the Forest Service in one place or in the same region. For example, N.E. "Than" Wilkerson joined the Bitterroot Forest Reserve as a Ranger in 1899 (under the Interior Department), continued in the service until retirement and later recalled with pleasure his adventures and experiences as a Forest Ranger in the Northern Region.<sup>40</sup>

As was frequently said, the year of a forester was divided into two parts -- the fire season -- and the rest of the year.<sup>41</sup> In a bad year the forester could expect nothing but fire, fire and more fire from June until the September rains came. Then the balance of the all and the next spring would be spent making plans for the next fire season. There were bad fire years in 1902 and 1905. The year 1908 was troublesome along the route of the Milwaukee Road which was building west through the central part of western Montana.

#### THE 1910 FIRE

But these experiences were but a prelude to the great "blow out" of 1910. According to the reports of the forest Rangers, the spring of 1910 was unusually dry and the month of July intensely hot. Fires had broken out in many parts of the Region, but forest Rangers plus some 3,000 additional fire fighters had contained and extinguished them by prompt action. The situation was so potentially dangerous that President William Howard Taft had authorized the use of the army for

firefighters in the northern Rockies. Then on August 20th the wind rose to gale strength and little fires turned into big ones:

For two days the wind blew a gale from the southwest. All along the line, from north of the Canadian boundary south to the Salmon, the gale blew. Little fires picked up into big ones. Fire lines which had been held for days melted away under the fierce blast. The sky turned a ghastly yellow, and at four o'clock it was black dark ahead of the advancing flames. ...the air felt electric as though the whole world was ready to go up on spontaneous combustion. The heat of the fire and the great masses of flaming gas created great whirlwinds which mowed down swaths of trees in advance of the flames.<sup>42</sup>

Fire fighting brigades found themselves surrounded and sometimes overwhelmed. So great was the disaster that trains were crowded with refugees fleeing the region. The fires continued until a general rain on August 31 brought the situation under control. An accounting showed that 80 firefighters lost their lives and dozens of settlers died as victims of the rampaging flames. More than 3 million acres of timber were destroyed and smoke had darkened the skies as far away as Denver and Kansas City. The fire had burned out many sawmills and villages and destroyed about one-half of the town of Wallace. Scars of the 1910 fire remained visible a generation later.<sup>43</sup>

Greeley, himself, spent many days on the fire line plugging weak spots, and arranging relief for exhausted Rangers. With

approval from the executive officers, Greeley even pressed men from the construction crews of the Northern Pacific and Great Northern into the struggle to contain the holocaust.<sup>44</sup>

The 1910 fire hastened steps to coordinate and expand fire prevention facilities of the Region. Greeley actively encouraged timber owners to organize a formal body and they took action to establish the Northern Montana Forestry Association to provide protection for more than a million acres of industrial timberland outside of the National Forests. The State of Montana had created a State Forestry Board in 1908 and appointed Charles W. Juneberg as the State Forester. He supervised some 200,000 acres of state land and was directed to cooperate with the Forest Service and private land owners. In Idaho timbermen organized the Western Forestry and Conservation Association in 1909. The 1910 fire generated new members and new funds for these organizations and associations. One lumber company official explained the necessity for cooperation succinctly and simply: "if the fire wasn't on my land it soon would be if I didn't put it out."<sup>45</sup> The next year Congress passed the Weeks Law which provided federal matching funds for states that established effective state organizations to protect the forests of the state from fire. The great fire of 1910 provided an imperative incentive for federal, state and industry agencies to band together to fight the constant fire menace in the Northwest.<sup>46</sup>